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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000786

SIPDIS

AID FOR DCHA/FFP LANDIS, CRUMBLY, MUTAMBA, PETERSEN
AID FOR DCHA/OFDA FOR PRATT, KHANDAGLE,
HALMRAST-SANCHEZ, GOTTLIEB
AFR/SA FOR LOKEN, COPSON, DOBBINS
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PRETORIA FOR, DISKIN, HALE, SINK, REYNOLDS
NAIROBI FOR SMITH, BROWN
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Zimbabwe's Growing Water Problems
Threaten Health; Country's Poor

Summary

1. Zimbabwe's urban infrastructure is rapidly deteriorating as a result of six consecutive years of GOZ economic mismanagement. The supply and distribution of potable water has become especially problematic in several cities. There are reports of diarrhea and other stomach ailments increasing in affected areas. Repairing the water system would be expensive and would require international assistance, unlikely given the GOZ's refusal to undertake political and economic reforms. Meanwhile, Zimbabwe's poor continue to bear the brunt of their leaders' economic mismanagement. End Summary.

Urban Water Shortages

2. In April and May 2005, Harare experienced acute potable water shortages, with several communities experiencing up to four weeks or more with no safe drinking water. Areas most affected are the eastern suburbs of Mabvuku, Tafara, Greendale, Highlands and Chikurubi. Mabvuku and Tafara have gone without 24-hour reticulation for up to a year and Zimre Park, for example, has gone without water for a three-month stretch now. A recent demonstration in Tafara over water issues resulted in numerous arrests. Water shortages have also been experienced in other cities and municipalities.

Poor Governance: the Main Factor

3. Zimbabwe was once renowned for its effective water management systems and urban infrastructure. However, the combination of age, lack of maintenance, high domestic interest rates and growing urbanization have placed all systems under tremendous strain. A key factor contributing to the problem is the lack of foreign currency to purchase imported water purification chemicals and spare parts for treatment plants and pumping stations. High domestic interest rates have also inhibited long-term borrowing needed to maintain and expand the water infrastructure.

4. The central government has also imposed on local authorities unrealistically low rates for services, which is widely perceived as political grandstanding and intended to hamper the predominantly opposition-led local authorities from being able to effectively deliver municipal services. These imposed low rates further prevent the local authorities from recovering the cost of services or generating funds for necessary maintenance and expansion.

Health Concerns

5. Unsafe water is increasingly cited as the

reason for growing numbers of outbreaks of diarrhea and other stomach ailments. The Director of Health and Environment for Harare stated that while cholera and dysentery have not appeared in the city water system, scabies (a parasitic skin disease), which can be attributed to a lack of clean water, has spread across the city. Likewise, water experts at the University of Zimbabwe report that there is no monitoring of heavy metals and that parasites remain a problem in the system.

Comment

16. Water shortages are not unusual in Zimbabwe, typically occurring during the hotter months of September to November. However, the fact that these problems are surfacing earlier than normal is particularly troubling and bodes ill for the immediate future. The cost of repairing the country's infrastructure would run into millions of U.S. dollars -- Harare alone needs a massive upgrading of its entire water distribution system. Without international assistance this won't happen, and that in turn requires political and economic reforms the government is not prepared to undertake. In the meantime, the poorest of Zimbabwe's poor will continue to suffer from their government's failings.

SCHULTZ

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